

ED 024 080

By Betz, Robert L.; And Others

Perceptions of Non-College-Bound Vocationally-Oriented High School Graduates.

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Spons Agency-Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Div. of Vocational and Technical Education.

Pub Date [68]

Note- 17p.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.95

Descriptors- Counselors, \*Educational Experience, Family Relationship, Interviews, \*Noncollege Preparatory Students, \*Student Attitudes, Teachers, Vocational Development

In-depth structured interviews of 309 high school graduates judged to be "non-college bound" explored perceptions of their: (1) educational experiences, (2) vocational experiences, (3) self-concepts and (4) family relationships. Interview data was compiled two years after high school graduation from subjects residing in urban, "rurban," and rural environments in four mid-central states. Content analysis of written reports of subjects' perceptions resulted in four major conclusions: (1) employment bound, non-college oriented students perceive the school, the counselors and other personnel within the school as "favoring" the college bound student, (2) counselors were not perceived as being "helpful" in assisting employment bound youth to satisfactory vocational decisions, (3) subjects were unable to articulate "meaningful" concepts of self, and (4) generally, they did not perceive parents as being at all "helpful" in resolving personal, educational, and vocational problems. (Author)

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VOCATIONALLY-ORIENTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

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The research reported in this article was supported by a grant awarded by The United States Office of Education under the provisions of Section 4 (C) of the Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1963.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE  
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## INTRODUCTION

Friedenberg (1965) described a serious perceptual dichotomy among contemporary high school age adolescents. Many tend to see the educational and vocational world divided into two major sub-groupings: (1) the college bound (the "Frats") and (2) the non-college bound (the "Greasers"). While in itself the perception is inherently neither good nor bad, the "set" which results from the perception has important educational and vocational consequences for young men and women.

Because of this perceptual "set", many values and attitudes toward education and employment develop and crystallize. Young men and women see college bound peers as desirable models and non-college bound peers as non-desirable; they see college bound peers as leaders and favored by the "establishment" and non-college bound as followers and not favored by the "establishment"; and they see college bound peers as receiving the best efforts of the school and non-college bound peers as receiving what is left over. The consequence of these perceptions is a continuance of a class against class, "in" versus "out" conflict which poses a serious threat to the continuing development of a viable democracy. The school as a social institution, Friedenberg points out, instead of breaking down the existing barriers of status, class consciousness and race, tends to perpetuate the perceptual dichotomy which, in turn, intensifies non-democratic conditions in the school.

## THE PROBLEM

While Friedenberg constructs a convincing case for his thesis, he leans heavily on case study material and a rather limited sample for support. If the perceptual dichotomy does indeed exist, then it should show up even more convincingly in a follow-up study of recent high school graduates--especially those who were not considered "college bound" by the educational milieu.

While some follow-up studies of college bound youngsters and high school dropouts have been reported (Rothney & Roems, 1950; Worbis, 1947; Cantoni, 1955; Turney and Morehead, 1954) studies of non-college bound high school graduates of any magnitude or systematic nature are practically non-existent. Although it is known that this group usually moves directly into the labor market, beyond that little information is available about their educational and vocational experiences, their perceptions of their schools, their self-concepts or their needs, desires and aspirations.

Perhaps the most carefully done of the reported follow-up studies of high school graduates is Rothney's (1958) study of four representative Wisconsin High Schools with a total N of 870 students. Rothney concluded that differences (although slight) favored those recipients of formalized counseling programs. However, Rothney did not distinguish between the college and non-college-bound student.

The primary purpose of the present study was to assess selected characteristics of non-college, vocationally oriented high school graduates.

A secondary purpose was to "feed back" to educational institutions the perceptions and evaluations of a majority of their graduates--the non-college-bound student.

### THE SAMPLE

Mallinson (1963) began a longitudinal study of over 6,000 seventh graders to determine the factors related to the achievement of students in science courses in junior and senior high schools.

In 1963 over 4,000 students from this original population graduated from high school. From this population, approximately 3,000 high school graduates were judged by teachers, administrators and counselors as "non-college-bound". A modification of the Alphabetic Matrix Sampling technique was used to randomly select 350, or slightly over 10%, for inclusion in the sample for study. The actual number of usable cases for analysis was 309.

The subjects resided in four North Central States (Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois) and 12 locations; graduated from large and small high schools (graduating class of 70 versus graduating class of 2,000); resided in rural, "rurban" and urban environments (rural population of 1,602, "rurban" population of 42,000 and urban population of 130,000).

From all available impressions, the sample for study was representative of the region between the "megapolis strip" along the East Coast and the Mississippi River, with the possible exception of the "core" or "inner city".

### THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS

In order to obtain data on the perceptions and experiences of the sample selected, individual interviews were scheduled and conducted over an 18 month period. The subjects at the time of interviewing were two and three years past high school graduation. About one-third were interviewed at their residences while the others were interviewed at motels or offices. One hour was allotted for each individual interview.

The individual interviews were semi-structured. They were structured in the sense that four specific areas (self-concept, family relationships, educational and vocational experiences) were systematically probed by the interviewers. They were open-ended in the sense that leads provided by the interviewee were followed and developed on the judgment of the interviewer, regardless of sequence or structure. Numerous interviewing techniques, e. g., simple support, direct and open-ended questions, listening, and clarification, were used to gain insight into the perceptual "set" of the subject. The combination of systematic structure, which permitted a zeroing-in on key developmental areas, and open-endedness which permitted flexibility and lead development, resulted in the collection of much vital data that could not



be gathered in a questionnaire-type study. By extending open-ended leads and watching and listening for non-verbal and verbal cues, the trained interviewers were able to obtain attitudinal and perceptual information valuable to the profile under construction.

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Coding and statistical analysis of the data is now underway as part of the larger and previously cited longitudinal study (Mallinson, 1963, 1968). This analysis will relate prior testing and performance data collected during junior and senior high school to the data collected in the depth interview phase of the study. It will correlate selected testing and performances data to subsequent advanced training (if any), to the characteristics of persons selecting various programs, to the differences in characteristics of college versus non-college attenders and other critical questions not now answered or available in longitudinal design form.

The present report analyses selected aspects of the data gathered under interview conditions and of interest and use to school counseling and guidance personnel. The report focuses on the perceptions of recent high school graduates (no dropouts were included in the study) two or three years after they successfully completed their high school education. At this stage they were far enough removed to view their experiences with objectivity, yet not too far removed to blur memory

patterns. It must be remembered, too, that the authors place no value judgments on the perceptions of the graduates, but report their verbal statements (many of them verbatim) and the reports of their experiences. The study offers counseling and guidance personnel an opportunity to perceive through the eyes of young men and women the way in which they view a critical developmental stage of their life.

### EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL PERCEPTIONS

Even though it was predicted by school personnel that the subjects included in the sample were not "college-bound", results of the interviews revealed that 19% did make some attempt at a college education. The percentage is significant and much larger than anticipated. Even though they were self and other "labeled" as non-college-bound, a change in perceptual set and attitude occurred after graduation. It would also indicate that the assessment and identification processes of the school were not entirely successful in determining, so called, "college aspiration".

Most of this group, despite their previous intentions, were now able to reflect:

. . . the need for further education to realize the potential I have as a person.

. . . further education is necessary for a good paying job.

. . . a college education is needed in today's world.

However, 56% of the students who had attempted college had dropped out or had been dismissed when the interviews took place. For the most part they placed the blame squarely on themselves for not being able to succeed but some did place the blame on the schools. In their judgment,



teachers failed to make education interesting and challenging because they (the teachers) did not seem to be enthusiastic about teaching nor developing substantive classroom experiences.

The pattern of college attendance for this group was much different from the normal college pattern. Much of their work was taken on a part-time basis, the pattern of attendance was erratic (semesters off to work, etc.) and most attended school within commuting distance of home. Many held either full or part-time jobs and it was not unusual to find students with only 20 or 25 hours of college credit three years after graduating from high school.

In addition to the 19% who had attempted some college study, 23% of the sample entered some form of technical and/or vocational training. In these programs of study the dropout rate was much lower than the college group (27%) and the number of successful completions was also much higher. A majority (68%) of those attempting technical and vocational training were females enrolled principally in practical and professional nursing (less than four years), secretarial, beauty-culture and hair-styling curricula.

Of significance is the low number of young men (33%) who attempted some technical or vocational training even though they perceived that it was important to develop additional skills for an ever-increasing world of technology. Only seven (2%) of the sample studied were enrolled in federally sponsored or supported technical or vocational educational programs.

The majority of the sample studied saw high school graduation as the terminal point in their formal education, and were most articulate in indicating they desired no further formal schooling. Even though they perceived that future job stability and security depended on some form of training, they indicated that additional schooling was by and large not for them.

Examination of the data relating to the non-college-bound student and his global evaluation of his school experience revealed that only 29% evaluated their experience as being valuable and positive. These ex-students perceived that the school had made a significant impact both educationally and personally on their lives. Conversely, 54% of the sample surveyed had neutral reactions, and 17% had marked negative reactions to their high school experiences.

It is tragic that after three or four years in high school programs as many as 54% could not perceive that this program had any significant effect--positively or negatively--on their lives.

Typical negative and neutral reactions about their high school experience, which tend to support Friedenberg's thesis about the alienation of the non-college-bound student, were:

School is snobish. If your family doesn't belong to the Country Club, you're just not in--the kids don't speak to you and the counselors don't have time for you.

The program for non-college bound students was not interesting, functional or practical. The standards were too high. The connotation was one of second class citizens.

The student council was a 'rubber stamp' for the Principal.

If you came from the wrong side of the tracks, teachers had no use for you.

When asked what people had the most influence on future educational and vocational decisions, again the institution which purports to be the principal agent in promoting these decisions was not perceived in that way by the sample under study. The self-experiences of the student, his parents and his peers were listed in that order as being most influential in making educational and vocational decisions. Teachers and counselors were listed next as influential individuals but the number mentioning school personnel was relatively smaller than the first three listed. It is interesting to note (See Table I) that only 7% of the vocationally oriented students mentioned that the counselor had any influence on future educational and/or vocational decisions.

Table I  
Influential People on Educational Decisions

Person	No. of Responses*	Percentage
Self	161	34.9%
Parents	135	29.3%
Friends	63	13.7%
Teachers	46	10.0%
Counselors	33	7.2%
Relatives	17	3.7%
Ministers	4	.8%
Family Doctor	2	.4%
TOTALS	461	100.0%

\*Many indicated more than one influence.

These data do not support the contention that counselors spend the majority of their time in "educational" and "vocational" counseling and therefore have little time for "personal" counseling. If the counselors' contentions were true, the data would reflect that they had spent considerable time in working with non-college-bound students concerning their educational and vocational development and would be perceived by students as being "helpful".

To delineate the problem more specifically, test results gathered on the sample at the 9th grade level had indicated 71% "intending to go to college" (Mallinson, 1964). Yet when the group graduated from high school less than 30% went on to college. Obviously there were dramatic changes in aspiration for many students between the 9th and 12th grades. At this critical stage in educational and vocational development, students needed adequate assistance in resolving these concerns. However, if the perceptions of the students are accurate, counselors had little influence in the area where they should be most competent.

Following are representative perceptions which were voiced by students as they reflected on their high school counselors.<sup>1</sup>

I'm bitter toward my counselor because he told me, "with your average you couldn't possibly get into nursing school."

The counselor was the man you went to if you had a discipline problem.

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<sup>1</sup>(It is important to note at this point that the subjects had no notion that the interviewers were counselor educators and therefore were biased toward the question.)

Counselors should do a better job painting the future job picture and spend more time helping non-college-bound students with their future plans.

Counselors should spend more time with potential dropouts, lining up courses they can succeed in, showing that they care, be more lenient on graduation requirements, all with the idea of preventing dropouts, which leads to running the streets and ending up in prison.

My counselor was just drawing a pay check; he told you what to do, but was not the kind of person you would feel free to go to with a personal problem.

One-third of the sample studied were able to offer suggestions for improving the schools. The question on 'suggestions' was prefaced with the remark by the interviewers ". . . if money were no item, what suggestions would you make to improve the high schools? "

The five most often mentioned suggestions were:

1. Have smaller classes so teachers can get to know students.
2. Offer some kind of class in "psychology".
3. Have full-time counselors.
4. Offer more courses for the non-college-bound student.
5. Hire more younger teachers who are close to high school students and who seem to understand them.

It is significant to note that the five most frequently mentioned suggestions for improving high schools had as their central theme the improvement of interpersonal relationships. Students felt that a sense of belonging was one of the most important attributes to be attained in a good high school, and that any staff or curricular innovations which would help accomplish this end would be of benefit.

Strangely enough the suggestions mentioned would not call for a drastic overhaul of the educational structure nor would they call for additional large expenditures of money.

### SELF-CONCEPT AND FAMILY CLIMATE

One of the most significant impressions received by the interviewers about the vocationally oriented, non-college-bound student was his inability to articulate a meaningful self-concept. Sixty-six percent of the subjects were not able to make expressive statements about self even with a great deal of encouragement and suggestions from the interviewers. Even after further interpretation, 10% were unable to provide a single descriptive word about self. Many seemed immobilized by the leads provided, as if the interviewer was speaking in a foreign language.

The question begs itself. How can young people make meaningful educational and vocational (not to speak of personal and social) decisions with little knowledge of self? Regardless of the many reasons why counselors (and others in the schools) do not help young people explore self in a meaningful way, it is imperative that full-time counselors, with adequate time to counsel, be employed. It is not implied here that counselors are the only meaningful and significant people who can help youngsters accomplish this key developmental task. Rather, it is argued that this task is one of the prime responsibilities of counselors, and at the present time and within the limitations of the sample studied, analysis of the data show little effort is being directed to this crucial task.



When asked what changes they saw in themselves from five years ago and what the influencing factors were, the predominant responses were: job, marriage, school, maturity with age, armed services, having children and living away from home. It is significant that only seven students (2%) indicated the changes were due to self-exploration. Again, the implication for counselors is clear. Within the limitations of the sample, the analysis of the data reflect little effort is being directed to this crucial task.

The data concerning the family climate were significant. Forty-one percent of the sample stated their parents were not helpful when they encountered personal problems or in planning educationally and vocationally for the future.

In response to the question: "What are some of the things you wish your parents would have done for you but did not", the following answers are representative:

Wishes parents had been willing to help them on their problems and plans.

Wishes parents had encouraged college or training beyond high school.

Wishes parents had placed more restrictions on hours, studying, dating.

Wishes parents had provided more financial support in high school so that it would not have been necessary to work, thereby allowing them to take a college preparatory program and go to college.

These statements by students about their parents, coupled with the fact that 41% stated their parents were not helpful on personal problems nor in formulating educational and vocational goals, strongly suggest that neither parents nor school personnel are serving as "significant others" in the life space of these young people.

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion I: The data clearly substantiated Friedenberg's thesis that

a perceptual dichotomy does exist within the sample studied.

Employment bound, non-college oriented students perceive the school, the counselors and personnel within the school as favoring the college-bound population.

Implication: The school as a social institution, instead of reinforcing

this dichotomy, must strive to reorganize itself to break down

these perceptual "sets" and promote a sense of identity for all

students. For teachers, this means reassessing their value

systems to include "blue collar" workers as "first" and not

"second-class" citizens. For curriculum designers modification

is needed to strengthen, give substance and honor to experiences

designed to assist the non-college bound student in his search for

vocational identity. For counselors, recognition and positive

attitudes toward the employment world of the non-professions,

is needed together with an understanding of socio-economic

classes, other than the middle class, and, the vocational

expectations and problems of different races, religions, and minority groups.

Conclusion II: Counselors, despite their insistence that they are performing educational and vocational counseling, were not perceived as being at all helpful in assisting the employment-bound youth to a satisfactory vocational decision. Counselors were perceived as not available, too busy, too involved with college-bound students, or simply not known to this group.

Implication: Despite the problems of load and priority, counselors, if they are to change the perceptions of employment-bound youth, must find time to counsel with these students as they come to grips with their vocational objectives.

Conclusion III: It is axiomatic that an accurate perception of self is necessary for realistic vocational and educational planning. Generally, the employment-bound youth interviewed in this study could not articulate a meaningful concept of self.

Implication: Meaningful self-discovery involves time and a systematic, developmental counseling approach. Counselors, if they are to make an impact in this area, must engage employment-bound youth in meaningful dialogues which encourage and cause these clients to reflect and resolve their internal view of self.

Conclusion IV: The employment-bound youth did not perceive parents as being especially helpful in resolving personal, educational or

vocational problems and concerns. Coupled with Conclusion III above, the lack of a "significant other" in the life space of these youngsters was evident.

Implication: Counselors must perform an "outreach" function of involving parents in the understanding of the educational and vocational problems encountered by this group of students. Basic to everything, is a parent who cares, who is concerned, and who demonstrates this concern. Too often, blame is directed toward the parent for the problems of their children, but little is done in going beyond the blame and searching out ways in which counselors can assist parents to systematically help their children.